

Message Text

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71-62

ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3509

INFO AMCONSUL RECIFE

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DEPT PASS AID/PHA/FDRC

E.O.11652: N/A

TAGS: SWEL, BR

SUBJECT: SITREP NO. 1 - DROUGHT IN NORTHEAST

REF: STATE 13540

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1.FOLLOWING IS SITREP ON DROUGHT IN THE NORTHEAST AS PROVIDED BY CONSUL RECIFE BASED ON CONVERSATION WITH MANUEL ALVES DA SOUZA, COORDINATOR FOR THE NORTHEAST OF GEACAP, BRAZIL'S EMERGENCY RELIEF ORGANIZATION.

2. GEACAP, SUDENE, AND OTHER GOVERNMENT ENTITIES DO NOT LABEL THE CURRENT DRY SEASON AS A DROUGHT. INSTEAD IT IS QUOTE AN EXTENDED DRY SEASON UNQUOTE WHICH HAS AFFECTED ONLY A FEW SMALL AREAS IN THENORTHEAST'S WESTERN INTERIOR, OR SERTA0.

3. THIS "EXTENDED DRY SEASON HAS OCCUREDIN TWO AREAS IN PARTICULAR:

(1) IRECE IN NORTH CENTRAL BAHIA AND (2) THE WESTERN PART OF PERNAMBUCO STATE. THE DRY SEASON HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL AND "IRREGULAR" IN PARTS OF PIAUI, CEARA, RIO GRANDE DO

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NORTE, AND MINAS GERAIS. BUT, ACCORDING TO ALVES, THE SITUATION

IN THESE LATTER AREAS IS NOT YET CONSIDERED TO BE SERIOUS DUE TO RECENT RAINS AND OTHER CLIMATIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS.

4. ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION: OF THE AREAS HARDEST HIT BY THE "EXTENDED DRY SEASON" IRECE HAS A POPULATION ON 215,000 AND WESTERN PERNAMBUCO 415,000, OF WHICH SEVENTY PERCENT (IN BOTH PLACES) ARE CONSIDERED RURAL. ALVES EXPLAINED THAT WHILE THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF MOST OF THE POPULATION IN THE SERTAO IS GENERALLY MARGINAL UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, THE DRY SEASON HAS NATURALLY CREATED SOME HARDSHIP IN THE ABOVE AREAS. HE HASTENED TO ADD THAT THE PLIGHT OF THE POPULATON THERE WAS NOWHERE NEARLY SO SERIOUS AS THE PRESS WAS CHARACTERIZING IT. HE ACCUSED THE NEWSPAPERS, EXPECIALLY THE ESTADO DE SAO PAULO AND THE JORNAL DO BRASIL, OF SENSATIONALIZING AND EXAGGERATING THE CURRENT DIFFICULTIES. HE EMPHASIZED THAT ALTHOUGH THERE HAD BEEN SOME MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE OUT OF THE DRY AREAS. THE NUMBERS WERE THOUGHTTO BE VERY SMALL, CONTRARY TO THE CLAIMS OF THE PRESS. ANIMAL (CATTLE, GOATS) MORTALITY WAS ON THE INCREASE BUT NO "OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT" OF THE NUMBERS INVOLVED HAD BEEN MADE. HEALTH PROBLEMS, SUCH AS AN EPIDEMIC OR WIDESPREAD DEATH DUE TO STARVATION, DID NOT EXIST IN EITHER OF THE AREAS.

5. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: BOTH THE FEDERAL GOVENMENT AND THE STATES (PENAMBUCO AND BAHIA) ARE COORDINATING A RELIEF PROGRAM WHICH BEGAN LAST DECEMBER WITH THE FIRST SIGNS ON THE "EXTENDED DRY SEASON." ALREADY SOME 300 TONS OF FOOD HAVE BEEN DISTRIBUTED TO THOSE IN NEED AND A FLEET OF WATE TANK TRUCKS ARE SERVICING THE HARDEST HIT RURAL TOWNS ON A DAILY BASIS. A TOTAL OF 7,000 RURAL WORKERS HAVE BEEN HIRED UNDER A GOVENMENT PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAM TO REPAIR ROADS, DIG SMALL WATER RESERVOIRS, ETC. IN LOCATIONS CLOSE TO THEIR HOMES AND FAMILIES. THE WORKERS ARE BEING PAID IN FOOD (70 PERCENT) AS WELL AS CASH (30 PERCENT) RECEIVING THE EQUI ALENT OF THE CURRENT MONTHLY MIMIMUM SALARY (CR 417). AS OF JANUARY 22, SUDENE DREW UP TWO AGREEMENTS BETWEEN ITSELF AND THE STATE GOVERNMENTS OF PERNAMBUCO AND BAHIA TO PROVIDE THE NECESSARY FUNDS AND FOOD TO COVER IN NECESSARY THE EMPLOYMENT OF A TOTAL OF 20,000 PERSONS MOST ADVERSELY AFFECTED IN EACH OF THE STATES. THE DEVELOPMENT BANK ON THE NORTHEAST ANNOUNCED IT WOULD EXTEND CREDIT TO FARMERS IN THE SUFFERING AREAS IN ORDER TO PERMIT THEM TO SUBSIST UNTIL THE RAINS COME.

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6. CONSUL RECIFE COMMENTS THAT SUDENE AND GEACAP APPEAR TO BE PLAYING DOWN, PERHAPS TOO MUCH, THE DROUGHT AND ITS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS. BETWEEN THE GUARDED GOVERNMENT ASSESSMENTS AND THE STORIES PUT OUT BY THE PRESS, THERE

REMAINS UNCERTAINTY ABOUT WHERE OR WHAT THE TRUTH REALLY IS. THE DROUGHT AREA MAYNOT BE AS EXTENSIVE AS SOME OF THE NEWSPAPERS ARE CONTENDING, BUT IT PROBABLY IS SOMEWHAT MORE EXTENSIVE THAT GEACAP IS WILLING TO ADMIT. IT IS CLEAR THAT THE GOVERNMENTIS DELIBERATLY PLAYING DOWN THE DROUGHT IN ORDER TO AVOID CREATING MILD PANIC IN THE NORTHEAST'S INTERIOR, WHICH IN TURN WOULD PROVOKE THE MOVEMENT OF A LARGE MASS OF PEOPLE TO THE COASTAL AND SOUTHERN CITIES.WITH UNEMPLOYMENT ALREADY BECOMING A PROBLEM IN SOME CITIES, AND THE PROSPECT OF EVEN HIGHER RATES IN THE FACE OF THE ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN, THE GOVERNMENT WANTS TO PREVENT MASS POPULATIONS MOVEMENT. THE EMERGENCY PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMS TO CONCENTRATE ON PROJECTS IN THE AFFECTED AREAS SEEMS PROOF ENOUGH OF THIS POLICY. SHOULD THE DROUGHT IN FACT GROW WORSE AND BECOME WIDESPREAD, THE GOVERNMENT'S INSISTENCE THAT A DROUGHT DOES NOT EXIST RUNS THE RISK OF CAUSING A SERIOUS CREDIBILITY PROBLEM, HOWEVER.

7. EMBASSY IS APPROACHING OFFICIALS IN BRASILIA IN A LOW KEY MANNER TO OBTAIN SUCH OTHER INFORMATION AS IS AVAILABLE HERE ON THE SCOPE OF THE DROUGHT AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PLANS FOR DEALING WITH IT. REPORT WILL FOLLOW SEPTTEL.
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CRIMMINS

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